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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS
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Forty-eighth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 518th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Tuesday, 14 October 1997, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. SKOGMO (Norway)

CONTENTS

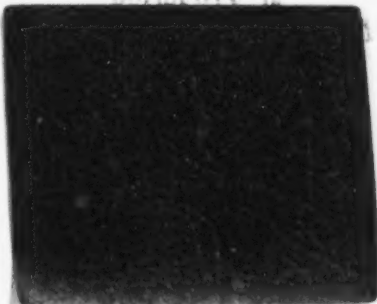
ANNUAL THEME: REPATRIATION CHALLENGES (continued)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

ANNUAL THEME: REPATRIATION CHALLENGES (agenda item 4) (continued)
(A/AC.96/882 and 887)

1. Ms. ANDERSON (Ireland) said there had been a significant deterioration in the environment in which the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) operated. Refugees were often not an unavoidable consequence, but the intended victims, of unrest. In areas such as Bosnia and the Great Lakes region, where the displacement of refugees served political ends, the role and activities of UNHCR were also perceived in political terms. Furthermore, UNHCR and its partners in humanitarian assistance operated increasingly in volatile and dangerous environments which threatened the safety of staff in the field. Too often, UNHCR personnel were required to operate in a moral quagmire and to confront agonizing choices with little time for reflection and in situations where all the available options carried a cost in terms of human suffering, sacrifice of principle, or both. She recognized that UNHCR had sometimes felt very alone in confronting those choices.
2. The international community had not distinguished itself in its response to recent crises. For example, the strategy for the repatriation of refugees to Rwanda which had been adopted at the previous year's Executive Committee had proved impossible to implement. Recent experience had shown that the international community must exercise greater foresight and responsibility. When humanitarian agencies were faced with "no-win" choices, there had already been a failure at various points along the line. Agencies and Governments must consider how their own policies and actions had allowed a drift towards a situation where all remaining choices were deeply flawed.
3. Consideration of repatriation should begin with the causes of displacement. In most cases, people became refugees because their rights had been ignored or abused and refugees were subjected to human rights violations in their countries of origin and, frequently, also in their countries of refuge. Repatriation could succeed only where human rights abusers were held accountable, basic rights were assured and reconciliation was taken seriously.
4. Her Government was deeply concerned by the Democratic Republic of the Congo's violation of the principle of refoulement, expulsion of UNHCR and other aid agencies from Goma and obstruction of the Secretary-General's investigative team. While acknowledging the pain and complexity of the recent history of the Great Lakes region, the international community could not fail to speak out when Governments violated their obligations under international law if it was not to erode the fundamental human rights and humanitarian principles which were the bedrock of policy.
5. Developing countries had always borne a disproportionate burden in trying to cope with overwhelming numbers of refugees in environments ill-equipped to receive them. While the international community rightly insisted that there should be no mitigation of the absolute responsibility of States to observe the international principles of behaviour towards refugees, there must also be a greater commitment to preventive approaches and increased readiness to help receiving countries cope. The representative of Luxembourg,

speaking of behalf of the European Union, had stressed the importance of public opinion in ensuring the smooth integration of refugees into countries of asylum. Ireland, which had experienced a great increase in asylum-seekers during the past two years, had seen at first hand how abuse of asylum could damage the public perception of refugee issues. Increased awareness of those issues was possible only if accompanied by a fair and efficient assessment process leading to the full integration of genuine refugees and the rapid repatriation of those who abused the process. She welcomed the attention given to that issue by UNHCR over the past year and the growing recognition that it had a role to play in that process.

6. Despite their unprecedented scale, the catastrophes in Bosnia and the Great Lakes region accounted for only a minority of the world's refugees. Ireland shared the High Commissioner's concern about the funding of less publicized crises, such as the situation of Bhutanese refugees, and of the General Programme and was responding positively to her appeal for additional resources. It was important to find a balance between, on the one hand, ensuring that repatriation was a durable solution which was implemented under acceptable conditions and, on the other, avoiding "mission creep" which would involve UNHCR in activities better undertaken by other agencies. The dilemmas faced by UNHCR were unlikely to disappear; however, improved anticipation, decisiveness, coherence and solidarity would make it possible for the international community to deal with them better.

7. Mr. AKAO (Japan) said that there had been no new large-scale refugee crises during the past year and that the state of emergency that had gripped the world since 1994 appeared to have ended, while the repatriation of 2 million refugees during 1996 was a step towards a durable solution to the refugee problem. However, the international community was faced with new challenges, including that of the reintegration of refugees into Rwanda, the protection of the remaining Rwandan refugees in the Great Lakes region and repatriation to the former Yugoslavia.

8. While voluntary repatriation was a desirable ideal, refugees placed an enormous burden on host countries. Japan supported UNHCR's efforts to protect the environment in and around refugee camps and offered bilateral assistance in environmental rehabilitation. Friction between local residents and refugees could lessen the generosity of asylum States and even lead to forced repatriation, such as that which was occurring in some African countries, in violation of the principles of humanitarian law. The large-scale return of refugees led to tension between returnees and the local population of the country of origin, which was, owing to the collapse of its social infrastructure and the weakening of its political and economic systems, unable adequately to protect the newcomers, as in the cases of the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. In Liberia, UNHCR had rightly refrained from encouraging early repatriation in order to avoid confusion as the peace process entered its final stage with the holding of presidential elections. Orderly repatriation required coordination between countries of origin and asylum and between international organizations. The UNHCR quick impact projects (QIPs) facilitated in the reintegration of returnees into their communities of origin; however, since long-term assistance to returnees was sometimes

considered to be beyond the mandate of UNHCR, the newly established Framework for Cooperation between that organization, the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the timely launching of the United Nations Consolidated Inter-agency Appeal and the Early Implementation of the Emergency Relief Coordinator system were of great importance.

9. In the post-cold war era, refugees were the products of ethnic confrontation. The disarmament and demobilization of conflicting parties, while indispensable, required impartiality and neutrality. Peacekeeping and other international monitoring operations were needed and the work of the Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in connection with the peace process in Liberia had shown the importance of regional organizations, particularly in Africa. Assistance programmes such as the "Open Cities" initiative in Bosnia and Herzegovina were also essential to promote reconciliation within nations and avoid the recurrence of ethnic conflict. Japan was convinced that social and economic development were also essential to the elimination of ethnic confrontation and was tackling development issues, particularly in Africa, by sponsoring the second Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD II), in cooperation with the United Nations and the Global Coalition for Africa (GCA), in autumn 1998 and by organizing an international conference on conflict prevention strategy, to be held in January 1998.

10. The Government of Japan planned to raise the issue of the security of humanitarian workers, including UNHCR staff, at the International Conference on the Present Initiative and Future Prospects of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations, to be held in Tokyo in March 1998. He urged member States to join Japan in ratifying the Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel, which had not yet entered into force owing to the insufficient number of signatory States. The international community must consider concrete measures aimed at increasing the number of parties to that Convention and should discuss the expansion of its scope to include the staff of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

11. He announced that Japan had pledged to increase its 1997 contribution to UNHCR programmes by US\$ 40 million, bringing its contribution for the entire year to a total of US\$ 104 million.

12. Mr. BALDOCCI (Italy) said that the recent crisis in Albania provided an example of effective international cooperation. Most of the refugees who had fled that country had not qualified for asylum under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. The Government of Italy had decided to admit them temporarily on humanitarian grounds while granting asylum to the small number who met the criteria established in the Convention. Italy was currently faced with the problem of repatriating the remaining Albanians by legal means while discouraging clandestine immigration, which was often run by organized crime syndicates. That repatriation, while not voluntary, was being carried out with the greatest respect for humanitarian concerns and in cooperation with UNHCR.

13. Monsignor BERTELLO (Holy See) said that document A/AC.96/887 (Annual theme: Repatriation challenges) demonstrated the complexity of the repatriation problem in the light of recent events, changes in the situation of countries of asylum and the attitudes of donor countries, and the fragile

structure and uncertain political future of several countries of origin. Worsening conditions in countries of asylum made them less willing to accept refugees and the international community had failed to take timely measures, such as the placement of refugees at a distance from borders and the separation of civilians, soldiers and militia in the camps, which would have facilitated the refugees' eventual return. He reaffirmed the position of the Holy See as presented in the document entitled "Refugees: A challenge to solidarity" (A/48/91), which had been published in 1992 and discussed by the General Assembly at its forty-eighth session. That document stated that "scrupulous respect for the principle of voluntary repatriation is the non-negotiable basis for the treatment of refugees. No person must be sent back to a country where he or she fears discriminatory action or serious life-threatening situations" (para. 14).

14. Experience had shown that refugees returned spontaneously to their countries of origin, sometimes without requesting international assistance, when they believed that it was safe to do so. Massive repatriations had been possible in Guatemala, Iraq and Mozambique once representatives of the refugees had been included in the negotiations between the countries of asylum and origin and had thus been given access to accurate information on which to base a group decision. Unfortunately, in other cases, refugees were manipulated and prevented from returning by their own leaders, the soldiers who often ruled in the camps or outside factors. As the Executive Committee had stated on several occasions, the mission of UNHCR was to protect refugees' right to choose whether to return, help them to make that choice, ensure that those who chose to return were able to do so in dignity and safety, protect those who, for valid reasons, decided not to return and help them to integrate into their host communities or to find another country of asylum.

15. Document A/AC.96/887 described various situations, some of them ambiguous or critical, and conditions under which refugees could be repatriated in their own interests rather than those of a political or economic nature. Those conditions included their ability to take up their former lives in the society from which they had fled and to achieve economic reintegration, particularly in the poorest countries. The international community must be willing to provide economic and logistical support, not only during repatriation, but also during the reconstruction of the country of origin. However, none of those efforts would be sufficient unless all parties concerned were prepared to work towards a new societal model, eliminating the causes of sometimes long-standing conflicts. Mere respect for ethnic balance or power-sharing agreements, often promoted at the expense of refugees, would not solve the fundamental problem and might well sow the seeds of new crises. While the international community could support such a project, local populations were primarily responsible for changing the fabric of their societies.

16. During his visit to Sarajevo in April 1997, Pope John II had emphasized the need for spiritual as well as physical rebuilding in the wake of war. Only through sincere dialogue could ethnic conflict and excessive nationalism give way to the right of all human beings to live in peace and serenity and without intolerance or persecution. All religions had a responsibility to assist in the creation of a climate of tolerance through education in peace and respect for truth and justice. Religious faith could facilitate

recognition of the suffering that had been inflicted and make it easier to forget hatred and revenge and to grant, and accept, forgiveness. NGOs also had an important role to play in that process. The Catholic Church, with its network of services and structures, would continue to cooperate with UNHCR in providing protection and assistance to refugees.

17. Mr. GYGER (Switzerland) said that repatriation was by far the best solution to refugee problems since, as emphasized in document A/AC.96/887, it contributed to economic reconstruction and encouraged reconciliation in war-torn societies. However, large refugee populations could destabilize local communities in asylum countries to such an extent that the refugees' safety could no longer be ensured and it was difficult to distinguish between consensual and coerced return. Under those circumstances, UNHCR might suddenly find itself in charge of an emergency evacuation rather than a repatriation programme. The situation in the Great Lakes region, which was marked by political unrest, violence and the displacement of large populations, many of them infiltrated by armed factions, was wholly foreign to the circumstances envisaged by those who had drafted the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. The choices made and activities carried out by UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations must therefore be evaluated in that context rather than according to the criteria for an ideal refugee operation.

18. The problem was to determine how the State directly involved, and the international community as a whole, had allowed such a situation to develop and whether that development could have been prevented. For example, it was clear that the task of separating members of armed factions from refugees in the camps had been incumbent on the military and political powers rather than on humanitarian agencies such as UNHCR. The Great Lakes conflict had raised the fundamental question of the relationship between humanitarian and political action. There was a real risk that humanitarian agencies would be manipulated by political forces. It would be useful for UNHCR, on the basis of its experience in that region, to inform the Executive Committee of the measures which it might take to avoid being exploited in that way and of how the international community could help it to do so.

19. By comparison with the dramatic events in the Great Lakes region, problems related to the return of unsuccessful asylum-seekers might seem a lower priority. However, those problems posed a threat to the institution of asylum as a whole and to the credibility of the system of international protection. Procedures for determining the status of asylum-seekers represented a major investment for host countries, yet those procedures were useless if the resulting decisions could not be implemented. Moreover, temporary protection could not continue to be granted without guarantees that the beneficiaries would return home when conditions permitted. Those issues should be the subject of in-depth discussion leading to the adoption of coordinated approaches not only between host countries, but also between countries of asylum and origin. In that regard, UNHCR could serve as a catalyst for discussion, take a clear position concerning the situation of countries of origin and ensure passive monitoring.

20. With regard to repatriation in the aftermath of conflict, his delegation stressed the importance of successful reintegration for the re-establishment

of peace, reconciliation and the prevention of additional forced displacements. However, UNHCR was not solely responsible for the success of repatriation efforts; political, social, economic and legal factors must also be taken into consideration. Development agencies, financial institutions and the States concerned must provide assistance at the earliest possible stage, not only in the field, but also in the area of long-term strategic planning. His delegation therefore welcomed the signing of memoranda of understanding between UNHCR and its partners and hoped that those agreements would extend beyond bilateral cooperation and provide precise and detailed information on modalities of multilateral coordination on the basis of the comparative advantages of the organizations in question.

21. While lasting peace and reconciliation were the ultimate goals, a distinction must be made between activities devoted primarily to those ends and those which played a contributory role. There again, humanitarian agencies did not bear the primary responsibility for peace, reconciliation and the development of war-torn countries and humanitarian action could not be a substitute for the political will of States, which must not make humanitarian agencies scapegoats for their own failure to find lasting solutions to crises and conflicts. While UNHCR could assist in the reintegration of refugees and the development of legal procedures in the field of refugee law, such activities were only a first step towards reconciliation. Other parties, including countries of origin, must intervene promptly in the areas of development, human rights and political monitoring, which were also essential if peace was to be achieved. In that regard, he welcomed the UNHCR "Open Cities" project in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

22. Lastly, he paid tribute to the representatives of UNHCR and other organizations who had lost their lives in the work of assisting refugees.

23. Ms. ROBINSON (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) said that she shared the concerns expressed by the High Commissioner for Refugees about the consequences of the lack of willingness of States to take adequate responsibility following the genocidal killings in Rwanda in 1994. The High Commissioner for Refugees had rightly underlined the strong links between human rights and refugee problems and she herself fully shared the view that refugee protection should be considered within the broader framework of international human rights.

24. Consequently, it was all the more necessary to strengthen linkages between UNHCR and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, since it was only by tackling the root causes of refugee flows that durable solutions could be found and the risk of further displacement mitigated. The shared interest of both Offices in the relationship between human rights and refugees was reflected in the in-depth legal study on the extent to which international law provided protection from arbitrary displacement which had been undertaken by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on internally displaced persons and would serve as a basis for a set of guiding principles on protection against displacement to be submitted to the next session of the Commission on Human Rights.

25. During the past year, it had become increasingly apparent that refugees and internally displaced persons often returned to countries in which human rights violations continued to exist. As the protection of human rights was a prerequisite for sustainable return and effective reintegration, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and UNHCR had a duty to work together to seek durable solutions to the plight of displaced persons. In recent years, the two Offices had begun joint monitoring of returns and had jointly assisted in establishing the conditions of safety and dignity that were conducive to return. Durable solutions to the problem of displacement also required significant efforts at reconstruction and reconciliation, to which her Office could make an important contribution through its technical cooperation and advisory services programme. She had taken note of UNHCR's pilot projects in the field of education for peace, conflict resolution and human rights education and had been pleased to receive a copy of its recent policy paper on UNHCR and human rights.

26. The notion of non-discrimination was inherent to the concept of human rights and a holistic, community-based approach was critical to ensuring social stability in areas of return and preventing future problems.

27. UNHCR and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights were and must continue to be engaged in joint activities. They had cooperated in formulating a Programme of Action to provide CIS Conference States with the tools necessary to address problems of forced migration in a manner consistent with human rights. In the coming year, they would jointly sponsor an expert panel and a publication on human rights, refugees and displaced persons. However, the challenge of ensuring the stability of return extended far beyond the mandate and capacities of any single organization and required the active involvement of a variety of multilateral actors. The current informal cooperation between the two Offices should be strengthened and formalized by means of joint meetings, exchanges of staff and co-sponsorship of staff training.

28. Cooperation between the two Offices should improve as a result of the ongoing reform of the United Nations. The participation of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in the four Executive Committees should help to harmonize work programmes and strengthen the international response to humanitarian crises. The standing invitations to her Office and to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on internally displaced persons to attend the meetings of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) should promote a sharpened focus on strategies to combat forced displacement and ensure the inclusion of the human rights perspective in inter-agency deliberations. She also expressed her keen interest in the Canadian guidelines on women refugees and her conviction that, together, the two Offices could make the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees more gender sensitive.

29. At the field level, a clear sharing of responsibilities between the Offices could be achieved through memoranda of understanding and the establishment of field presences - a recent and significant development for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights - could benefit from the extensive field presence of the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees. Where UNHCR's mandate limited its own involvement, it would be very useful for

the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to be alerted in order to provide displaced persons with adequate support in the process of return and reintegration.

30. The relationship between human rights and refugees went far beyond the provisions of article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and she looked forward to working closely with the High Commissioner for Refugees in order to find complementarities and new synergies in the activities of their respective Offices so as to ensure the highest possible degree of protection for the victims of displacement.

31. Mr. ALEMU (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia) said that the selection of "repatriation challenges" as the theme for the forty-eighth session of the Executive Committee testified to the fact that there was no greater satisfaction for peoples who had experienced refugee crises than to witness the voluntary return of their compatriots, in safety and dignity, to undertake the daunting task of building a new life and reconstructing their country.

32. Successful repatriation could take place only in a context of durable peace and stability, which could be brought about by tackling the root causes of refugee flows. Those causes were by and large political and, in seeking positive political outcomes, it was essential to avoid the temptation of a quick fix based on short-term calculations and to work instead through a consultative mechanism to determine whether the situation in the country of origin lent itself to viable repatriation programmes.

33. In the African context, regional organizations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) could facilitate joint discussions to steer repatriation operations towards reconciliation, stability and reintegration. Repatriation operations should be part of a continuum embracing both reintegration and sustainable development. While UNHCR's quick impact projects (QIPs) were vital, only a comprehensive programme of socio-economic development could sustain regional stability and induce more refugees to return home.

34. His delegation welcomed UNHCR's efforts to harmonize its activities with those of agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank and insisted on the need to articulate the timing and targeting of each agency's involvement so that, when UNHCR withdrew from reintegration activities, other agencies would take over, thereby enhancing UNHCR's traditional catalytic role in creating linkages between the initial stages of reintegration and sustainable development.

35. Mounting a repatriation operation was a challenging task and was perhaps beyond the capacities of countries suffering from the ravages of war and bad governance. UNHCR and its sister agencies should increase their efforts to build the capacity of returnee-receiving nations, through financial assistance and technical help, to make repatriations durable and sustainable. Although encouraging political developments in Africa gave reason to hope that refugees would return voluntarily to their countries, the economic situation in the countries concerned was not always attractive enough to secure their return. Financial assistance was required to ensure returnees a soft landing and

alleviate the burden borne by the receiving countries and communities. It was also perhaps necessary for UNHCR to go beyond its traditional role and to verify that due process of law was guaranteed in the repatriation process, thereby helping to prevent the erosion of the institution of protection and asylum for those in genuine need of it.

36. Turning to repatriation activities in Ethiopia, his delegation was deeply satisfied that, immediately after having repatriated over 1 million of its own citizens with the assistance and collaboration of UNHCR, Ethiopia was currently promoting durable solutions for refugees hosted in its territory. Following the completion of the pilot repatriation project for 10,000 refugees, preparations were under way to repatriate a further 10,000 to north-west Somalia, where the Government of Ethiopia had gone out of its way to support UNHCR in promoting durable solutions, despite the absence of a recognized authority there. Despite those encouraging developments, however, it was impossible not to express concern about developments in that repatriation exercise. In the absence of a recognized Government and given the weak absorptive capacity of the economy, there was little incentive to return to Somalia and the threat of a further exodus of refugees was very real.

37. Bilateral talks on the small caseloads of Djiboutian and Kenyan refugees in Ethiopia had been held in mid-1997 and he took the opportunity to reiterate his Government's commitment to facilitating those refugees' return to their countries and encouraged UNHCR to take initiatives in consultation with the countries of origin.

38. Because of unforeseen circumstances, it had been possible to repatriate only some 7,000 of the residual caseload of Ethiopian refugees in Sudan. His delegation looked forward to meeting representatives of Sudan at the current session of the Executive Committee to discuss matters of common concern and he was confident that, after decades of war, Ethiopia's reputation as a source of millions of refugees would be a thing of the past.

39. Despite its successful repatriation activities in 1997, Ethiopia had received new inflows of refugees from both Sudan and Somalia. The Ethiopian authorities had been compelled to provide proper care and maintenance for those refugees until lasting solutions could be found. The enormous sacrifices Ethiopia had made in hosting over 320,000 refugees were compounded by the fact that over 1 million Ethiopian returnees had to be given reintegration assistance. His delegation hoped to receive positive responses to the projects it would present for funding as part of its reintegration and development strategy for areas receiving returnees in Ethiopia. While repatriation was the most durable solution to refugee problems, it required the reorientation of returnee assistance towards sustainable development assistance through reintegration and rehabilitation in order to be effective.

40. Mr. AL-AAS (Sudan) drew attention to his country's positive record, both as a member of the Executive Committee for over a quarter of a century and as a country which, despite its own economic difficulties, was still hosting around 1 million refugees from its various neighbours. Regrettably, the active cooperation previously extended to Sudan by the international community had declined of late, leaving Sudan alone to cope with its serious

refugee problem, although the importance of international solidarity and burden-sharing had always been recognized by the Committee in the past and was again highlighted in the Note on International Protection submitted to the present session (A/AC.96/882).

41. The relative failure of the developments which had taken place in the Horn of Africa over the past seven years to ensure smooth voluntary repatriation of refugees currently hosted by Sudan was, in his view, attributable to three main factors. First, the inadequacy of the international community's response, especially with regard to rehabilitation in the countries of origin, had discouraged many refugees from returning to their homes. Secondly, some countries of origin had also been reluctant to encourage voluntary repatriation for fear of having to assume still greater economic burdens in the absence of appropriate international assistance. Lastly, political considerations also came into play, some countries of origin fearing that massive refugee returns might entail considerable changes in their countries' existing political structures. As a result, the living conditions of refugees in Sudan could be described as devastating, especially in view of current serious reductions in UNHCR assistance.

42. His delegation, which for several years had been warning the Committee of the very serious security, economic, social and political consequences for Sudan of the continuing deterioration of the refugee situation, once again called on the international community and UNHCR to shoulder their responsibility until the repatriation of the refugees had been fully achieved. Sudan, for its part, remained committed to the principle of voluntary repatriation in any form or modality that might be agreeable to the parties concerned.

43. Turning to the specific question of Ethiopian refugees, he expressed his Government's appreciation of the Ethiopian Government's signature in 1993 of the Tripartite Agreement providing for the establishment of a technical committee to facilitate the repatriation of Ethiopian refugees. Some 80,000 refugees had been successfully repatriated thus far. Some difficulties were, however, being encountered owing to the inadequacy of international assistance in connection with rehabilitation efforts and the numbers of refugees willing to return to Ethiopia within the framework of the Technical Committee arrangement had of late declined.

44. As a result of improved conditions in Chad, some 13,000 refugees had voluntarily returned to that country from Sudan, which was now, in collaboration with UNHCR, embarking on the process of returning the refugees still in the country. Ethnic affiliations across the borders between the two countries were causing some delays in the repatriation process. Another obstacle was the fact that many Chadian refugees had settled in urban areas of Sudan; both Governments were at pains to convince such refugees to return voluntarily to their country.

45. As for refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, about 5,000 had lived in Bahr Eljabal State for over 30 years and a similar number were to be found in other parts of Sudan. His Government was hopeful that developments in their country would encourage those refugees to

return home. A new group of 2,000 refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo had entered Sudan recently, but they had now indicated their willingness to go back.

46. In view of the situation in the region as a whole, and bearing in mind that repatriation challenges formed the main theme of the current session, his delegation renewed its call for a conference to set up a broad framework for agreed repatriation policies. Sudan had offered to host such a conference, which would be held under the auspices of UNHCR and OAU, and would actively participate in it whether it was held in Sudan or elsewhere in the region. The High Commissioner, when approached on the subject by his delegation, had welcomed the idea.

47. While Sudan was anxious to achieve the voluntary repatriation of foreign refugees to their countries of origin, it was equally occupied with efforts to repatriate its own refugees from neighbouring countries, where many of them were suffering from lack of security and harsh living conditions. Recent political developments in Sudan, the most important of which was the signing of the Khartoum Peace Agreement relating to the conflict in the south of the country, had created a new atmosphere of peace. Almost all political and armed factions had joined the Agreement, with the exception of one, which, it was hoped, would soon join the peace process. In view of such positive developments, Sudan called on its neighbouring countries and UNHCR to facilitate visits to Sudanese refugees with a view to enlightening them about the positive implications of the peace agreement and encouraging them to return to the country and contribute to the peace building process. At the same time, his delegation reiterated that all acts of forced conscription of children and their abduction and use in armed conflicts were contrary to all international humanitarian and legal norms and conventions, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The plight of Sudanese children still held captive in rebel camps made it imperative for the international community to break its silence and take urgent action to free those children and reunite them with their families.

48. The slow pace of voluntary repatriation operations made it impossible for the current level of the UNHCR programme for Sudan to meet basic refugee needs. The unwillingness of donors to support the Sudan programme because of unfulfilled repatriation expectations was thus creating a vicious circle in which poor repatriation results were succeeded by a sharp decline in assistance. The donor community and UNHCR should realize that such a situation would merely exacerbate the already existing economic difficulties facing Sudan and would ultimately result in still more suffering for the refugees. His Government deeply regretted the politicization of humanitarian efforts evident in the reluctance of certain donors to provide funds for the rehabilitation of refugee-affected areas as well as for the refugee assistance programme. As a result, a very important environmental project in the refugee-affected areas had been brought to a halt despite the importance which the international community attached to environmental concerns.

49. In conclusion, he reported that, together with UNHCR and WFP, Sudan had undertaken a census project in the refugee camps for the purpose of determining precise food requirements. A comprehensive census project had now been prepared with a view to obtaining a clearer picture of the actual numbers

of refugees in Sudan. The coverage was to include refugees living outside the camps, whose numbers were thought to exceed those of refugees living in camps. His delegation hoped that UNHCR would participate in the new exercise, which would be helpful with policy-making and planning in the areas of repatriation as well as of assistance.

50. Ms. MENG Xianying (China) said that, despite the unremitting efforts of the international community and UNHCR and the undeniable progress achieved, the global refugee situation did not yet allow any optimism. Her Government had always maintained that the solution to refugee problems lay in eliminating the root causes, as well as in providing humanitarian protection and assistance. Only by seeking peaceful settlements of disputes, promoting economic and social development, eliminating poverty and establishing a fair and rational new international economic order could the international community hope to create the necessary political and economic conditions for a thorough solution to refugee problems. Meanwhile, it should uphold the principle of international solidarity and burden-sharing by providing humanitarian protection and assistance to refugees and creating conditions for their voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement.

51. In particular, the international community should actively promote voluntary repatriation, which her Government believed to be the ideal and most practical solution to refugee problems. Countries of asylum should respect the principle of non-refoulement and avoid forcible repatriation of refugees to countries of origin where conditions were not ready for their return. The international community should support the asylum countries in that regard, especially by sharing the heavy burden borne by economically backward developing countries hosting large refugee populations. However, where the domestic, political and economic situation of the countries of origin permitted, those countries should assume the responsibility of accepting refugees who volunteered to return and assist their reintegration in society. As an asylum country, China had, despite its own limited resources, provided asylum for nearly 300,000 Indo-Chinese refugees for almost 20 years, steadfastly abiding by the principle of voluntary repatriation and never forcibly repatriating refugees. China respected the will of some Indo-Chinese refugees in China to return home and wished, together with the countries concerned, to help them do so in safety and dignity. As for those refugees who wished to remain in China, her Government would help them, as it had always done. It was to be hoped that the international community and UNHCR would continue to support China's efforts in that regard.

52. Her Government thanked UNHCR for its efforts to bring about a solution to the problem of Vietnamese refugees and boat people in Hong Kong. Since the conclusion of the Comprehensive Plan of Action more than a year previously, about 800 boat people and 1,000 refugees still remained in Hong Kong. Three months had now elapsed since Hong Kong's return to China. Her Government was greatly concerned about the refugee issue in Hong Kong and wished to see a complete settlement as early as possible. It hoped that the parties concerned would take further steps towards the early repatriation of the remaining Vietnamese boat people in Hong Kong and that the countries concerned would adopt a more positive and cooperative attitude in the matter of providing resettlement to the remaining refugees in Hong Kong.

53. Recalling her country's many years of friendly and fruitful cooperation with UNHCR, she noted with satisfaction that UNHCR had, during the current year, upgraded its Branch Office in China to a Regional Office. Her Government would be glad to strengthen further its cooperation with UNHCR and to join other countries in efforts to seek solutions to refugee problems worldwide.

54. Ms. WONG (China) said that more than 20,000 Vietnamese asylum-seekers had found first asylum in the tiny crowded territory of Hong Kong since 1975. Thanks to the efforts of UNHCR and the resettlement countries, some 143,000 Vietnamese had been resettled over the years and about 67,000 migrants screened out as non-refugees had been returned to Viet Nam in safety and dignity. The cost to Hong Kong of the Vietnamese refugee and migrant programme had often been ignored or underestimated. Hong Kong had spent the equivalent of over US\$ 1 billion by way of direct expenditure on the programme and, in addition, had advanced another US\$ 150 million to UNHCR for the care and maintenance of the migrants. UNHCR still needed to raise funds in order to reimburse that advance.

55. In addition to that not inconsiderable financial burden, Hong Kong had helped to solve the problem by serving as a place of resettlement. In the late 1970s, it had absorbed some 14,000 displaced people from Indo-China and another 1,700 boat people had been resettled in Hong Kong under various schemes since that period.

56. Although the Comprehensive Plan of Action of June 1989 had formally come to an end in June 1996, the Steering Committee of the International Conference on Indo-Chinese Refugees had agreed that, in the case of Hong Kong, where most of the non-refugees in the region remained, UNHCR would continue to make appropriate arrangements with the aim of completely disposing of the issue as early as possible.

57. At present, there were still some 1,300 Vietnamese refugees, 800 Vietnamese non-refugee migrants and over 1,000 illegal immigrants in Hong Kong. In terms of numbers, that was only about 1.5 per cent of the total number of arrivals. However, the last remaining refugees and migrants had proved to be the most difficult in terms of the search for durable solutions. UNHCR was actively pursuing resettlement opportunities for the remaining 1,300 refugees. It had been suggested in some quarters that they should be allowed to settle permanently in Hong Kong. The suggestion should be seen in the context of legal and illegal immigration pressures on Hong Kong. As a congested city with a small land area, Hong Kong had to maintain strict immigration controls on entry for residence purposes. The immigration quota for mainland Chinese was 150 persons per day. Of the 60,000 mainland Chinese residents who had come to settle in Hong Kong during the previous year, over 58,000 had been spouses and children of permanent Hong Kong residents and most of the remainder had also come to join relatives in Hong Kong. The immigration level per head of population was among the highest in the world. Hong Kong had a strict policy of repatriating illegal immigrants to their places of origin. Immigration controls had to be enforced very strictly, since anything else would be unfair to persons waiting patiently in the long queue for legal immigration.

58. In view of the serious immigration pressures on Hong Kong and its policy of repatriating illegal immigrants, including spouses and children of Hong Kong residents, it would be illogical to allow Vietnamese refugees who did not belong to Hong Kong and had no family ties there to settle permanently in the territory. To do so would create serious problems of double standards and would not be acceptable to the Hong Kong community.

59. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region made a special appeal to resettlement countries, as part of the final international burden-sharing effort to bring the whole Vietnamese refugee situation and the Comprehensive Plan of Action to a satisfactory conclusion, to give favourable and generous consideration to applications from the last remaining refugees. It hoped that resettlement countries and particularly those endorsing the Comprehensive Plan of Action would play their part in solving the Vietnamese refugee problem by examining the few remaining final cases in a flexible and sympathetic manner. Hong Kong would expect UNHCR to maintain its programme in Hong Kong pending the resettlement of the final refugees.

60. UNHCR's presence continued to be needed and its role in solving the problem was treasured. The refugees included abandoned children and sick and needy persons who could not be left to fend for themselves. Hong Kong had done a great deal in providing first asylum to massive numbers of Vietnamese people. It needed the international community's support for the UNHCR programme in Hong Kong. A solid and tangible indication of support could be given by way of donations or by appropriate earmarking of part of a country's contribution. While recognizing that there were many competing claims to the donor countries' attentions, she stressed that a refugee problem still existed in Hong Kong and that the UNHCR programme still had to continue. The people of Hong Kong had expended a great deal of effort and resources in resolving the tragic saga of Vietnamese refugees in a humane manner and they hoped that the international community, too, would continue to play its part.

61. MR. BRYLLE (Denmark), associating himself with the statement made at the previous meeting by the representative of Luxembourg on behalf of the European Union, said that, in Denmark's view, repatriation was one of three durable solutions to refugee problems and should, if possible, be the first choice. Whatever solution was chosen, however, the obligation of States fully to respect the principle of non-refoulement could never be sufficiently emphasized. Protection was the responsibility of States and States alone. UNHCR was required under its core mandate to assist and support States in their efforts to provide protection to refugees and also to promote and disseminate the principles of non-refoulement and protection. But, as the High Commissioner had said, the failure of individual States to comply with those basic principles should not be laid at the door of UNHCR.

62. In order to maintain the credibility of the institution of asylum, a solution had to be found to the problem of repatriating persons who, after a thorough determination procedure, had been found not to be in need of international protection. Much was being done at the national and multilateral levels to improve the possibility of efficient return for such persons. UNHCR, too, had a role to play, which could range from acting as a catalyst in bringing together the parties concerned to collecting and

disseminating information on the country of origin or to passive monitoring. His delegation suggested that an informal working group of interested countries should be set up for the purpose of holding further discussions on that question.

63. The lack of will to seek political solutions in situations of conflict was the root cause of the dilemmas which UNHCR increasingly had to face. Ideally, the point of departure for any decision taken by UNHCR in a situation where effective protection could not be fully ensured should be the need to safeguard protection in accordance with the core mandate. In reality, however, the choice was never so clear-cut. His delegation fully acknowledged the difficulty of the situation UNHCR faced in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It respected UNHCR's decision to suspend its activities in that country and expected the Democratic Republic of the Congo to change its course of action and live up to its commitments and responsibilities.

64. In order to identify the right response to a situation involving a potential risk of refugees being put under pressure or duress, it was necessary to inquire into the asylum country's motives. In some instances, armed elements and war criminals were intermingled with genuine refugees, creating the impression that the group as a whole did not qualify for protection. Separating such elements from the genuine refugees was part of the solution. The responsibility basically lay with host countries, but the task was not easy and the international community needed to discuss the issue with host countries in order to help them deal with situations of that kind. More generally, special attention should be given to countries hosting large numbers of refugees and providing protection and treatment in accordance with internationally accepted standards and additional ways and means should be found to ease their burden. Burden-sharing could comprise assistance for capacity-building as well as assistance to alleviate the social, economic and environmental impacts of hosting large numbers of refugees. As a last resort, it could include the provision of temporary protection elsewhere. His delegation urged that work should be undertaken along those lines, as suggested by UNHCR at the June meeting of the Standing Committee.

65. Repatriation in the aftermath of conflict posed a particular challenge to the parties to the conflict and to the international community. In such a situation, the planning and implementation of repatriation and reintegration programmes required an even more comprehensive and holistic approach, protection aspects being fully incorporated throughout the process. The international community should find improved ways of bridging the gap between short-term assistance in conflict situations and development in the longer term. Cooperation and coordination between humanitarian and development actors at an early stage of planning of repatriation programmes was needed in order to bridge that gap.

66. The Consolidated Appeal Process, which was a first step towards better coordination between the United Nations system, the International Committee of the Red Cross and non-governmental organizations, should be extended to include activities linking relief with development so as to involve

development actors at an early stage and to provide a mechanism for ensuring the sustainability of rehabilitation programmes. UNHCR's efforts to systematize collaboration with development and human rights actors were warmly welcomed. Groups of local and international non-governmental organizations concerned with both relief and development could play an important role in those efforts. The international community should actively support the country of origin in efforts to create conditions conducive to the safe return of refugees. As an example, UNHCR cooperation with OSCE, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and non-governmental organizations in building legal capacity and in human rights monitoring should be pursued further.

67. In all efforts to deal with return, repatriation and rehabilitation, the need to support reconciliation should be kept constantly in mind. The experiences of the past decade should be systematically analysed. One of the points that such an analysis would reveal would undoubtedly be the importance of the role of women in furthering reconciliation and ensuring sustainable peace and development. That was one of the reasons why his country considered it particularly important that programmes should take sufficient account of the gender perspective.

68. In conclusion, he announced that, in the current year, Denmark would make an extra contribution to UNHCR of DKr 100 million, of which DKr 20 million would be earmarked for the General Programme. That contribution, which was subject to parliamentary approval, would bring Denmark's contribution in 1997 to a total of DKr 269 million.

69. Mr. ULUCEVIK (Turkey) said that, despite the human suffering caused by continuing population displacements such as the second Great Lakes crisis at the end of 1996, the world's refugee population had been steadily decreasing. It was therefore timely for the Executive Committee to discuss the subject of repatriation challenges.

70. Of the possible durable solutions to refugee problems, voluntary repatriation should continue to be the preferred one. In effecting voluntary repatriations, UNHCR played the role of facilitator between the country of origin and receiving country and that of stimulator and guarantor among the refugee population. If voluntary repatriation failed, however, third country resettlement should be kept as a viable alternative.

71. The institution of asylum should continue to be respected and protected at every stage. It was true that, in recent years, the repatriation of refugees and asylum-seekers had increasingly taken place in volatile or unstable environments following or even during conflicts. Regardless of the circumstances surrounding return, however, free will should continue to be a prerequisite for any repatriation process and the principle of non-refoulement must be meticulously observed.

72. The right to seek asylum was a sacred right, but, like any category of human rights, it should also be protected from abuses that could impair the general welfare of host societies or destroy other rights and freedoms. First, there was a need to distinguish between asylum of a humanitarian nature

and asylum for economic, social or criminal reasons. Secondly, a clear code of conduct must be developed for situations where the peaceful nature of asylum was not respected. Examples of such cases were non-compliance with the national laws of the host State, destructive political activities against the country of origin, militarization of refugee camps and engagement in armed activities against the local population or neighbouring countries.

73. His Government believed that the cessation and exclusion clauses of the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol should be reinterpreted to meet the requirements that had emerged with the change in the nature of refugee flows. An asylum-seeker who ignored his responsibility towards the host State should lose recognition as a subject of international protection. If a refugee camp lost its civilian and humanitarian nature as a result of infiltration of armed elements, UNHCR must immediately ask for help from the host State authorities to eliminate such elements and bring them to justice. If the host Government was incapable of doing so, UNHCR must bring its mandate over such a camp to an end. In addition, people who had been involved in acts of terrorism should not by any means receive international protection. Those were but a few examples of situations where asylum must be lifted and repatriation made an indispensable option.

74. Temporary protection was an intermediate means of protection appropriate only in situations of crisis such as the one in the former Yugoslavia. As for the return of persons not in need of international protection, UNHCR's involvement must be consistent with its humanitarian nature: it had a role to play in the return of those who had committed a crime against peace, a crime against humanity, a war crime or a crime of terror, yet it should not be involved in the return of rejected asylum-seekers, most of whom were economic refugees or criminals. The argument that the continued presence of such people might have negative consequences for asylum was not valid. Every country had a shared responsibility in safeguarding the institution of asylum on strictly humanitarian grounds.

75. His country was faithful to its commitments under the 1951 Convention and, despite its geographical limitation, was cooperating extensively with UNHCR in admitting asylum-seekers from its eastern borders.

76. Mr. MBAYA (Democratic Republic of the Congo) said that the 17 May 1997 victory of the Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo over the Mobutu dictatorship had been a moment of historical importance for his country, ending 37 years of exploitation by foreign Powers and destruction and pillage by its own people. The Democratic Republic of the Congo was now firmly engaged in a process of national reconstruction and development, aiming to become a truly independent and sovereign country open to cooperation with foreign countries on an equal footing. That process required a change of mentality and methods with a view to building, in the heart of Africa, a modern and prosperous nation serving peace within its borders and stability and development in the subregion.

77. Known for its tradition as a country of asylum for refugees from all places, his country had until recently been among the countries sheltering the most refugees: nearly 1.5 million at the end of 1996, most of them from Rwanda. The massive influx of Rwandan refugees had been ordered by France in July 1994, through the United Nations "Operation Turquoise", which the Rwandan Armed Forces and militias had used to bring weapons, munitions and other Rwandan property into the Democratic Republic of the Congo using the civilian population as hostages and human shields. France and the other architects of the Rwandan genocide had been using that strategy to prepare a large-scale counter-attack from Zairian territory in order to destabilize the new Rwandan Government, which it considered to be short-lived and unpopular. That had begun a critical and disastrous period for the innocent Rwandan refugees, who had been forced to leave their country by the perpetrators of the genocide, supported by France. His compatriots in Kivu had not been spared.
78. Those starving population groups, lacking any humanitarian assistance, had immediately been struck by severe cholera. The humanitarian agencies had failed to come to the rescue in time and nearly 45,000 people had died in a two-week period. The international community, manipulated by France, the mastermind behind the disaster, was trying to make his country shoulder the blame for the Rwandan tragedy in its territory.
79. The hesitations, laxity and even complicity of the international community and the former Zairian regime had hardly been conducive to the removal and demilitarization of the numerous armed groups, which had continued to train in the camps in the presence of the international community and with the knowledge of the Zairian Government. Military action by the Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo had been necessary to liberate not only the Congolese people from the dictatorship, but also the masses of innocent Rwandans used as hostages by their genocidal brothers.
80. Since the first quarter of 1997, nearly all the refugees from the huge camps in Northern Kivu and Southern Kivu had returned to their country of origin. The UNHCR budget had been reduced accordingly, despite his country's rehabilitation and reconstruction needs.
81. His Government had quite recently learned of the presence, in the equatorial forest in Equateur province, of nearly 1,000 heavily armed former FAR combatants who were holding a large number of civilian refugees hostage and presumably preparing to confront the Congolese army. Their goal was to sow death and destruction among the innocent civilian population and others had even crossed their own national borders to join them.
82. More disturbing was the fact that certain United Nations bodies, in particular UNHCR, were aware of the situation in Equateur province. That explained the haste of the famous International Commission of Inquiry into the so-called massacres of Hutu refugees to begin its mission in Mbandaka, that province's county seat. Had the Commission preferred to deal with the enemies of the Congolese people hiding in the equatorial forest rather than strictly observe its commitments under the agreement signed with the Congolese Government? If so, the hesitations and laxity of the international community were not surprising.

83. While the United Nations remained deeply attached to its guiding principles in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, assistance activities to the people had been suspended by order of UNHCR. Dozens of refugees had recently died in the region and others were hospitalized at his country's expense.

84. The Congolese authorities had therefore seen fit temporarily to close the country's borders with Rwanda. That was also the basic reason for the temporary suspension of UNHCR activities in the eastern provinces of the country. Indeed, his country had learned that UNHCR representatives had compromised themselves through involvement in political activities in his country and the Great Lakes region, with complete disregard for their honourable status. It might well be asked how UNHCR presence could still have been justified in the provinces of Northern Kivu and Southern Kivu when there were no more refugees there. The truth was that, for strategic and/or survival reasons, UNHCR agents were facilitating the entry of Rwandan refugees into Congolese territory. His country had recently helped repatriate 4,000 of them, among whom it had identified former FAR members.

85. Now that his Government had undertaken to repatriate those refugees, efforts should focus on fully neutralizing those in the national territory or neighbouring countries who were trying to jeopardize any chance of reconstruction and pacification in any of those countries. The repatriation challenges raised by those outlaws and others in their pay should therefore consist of large-scale military operations aimed at eliminating tensions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and neighbouring countries. That would require active participation by the international community as a whole and especially the donor countries. It was also necessary to intensify the work of the International Tribunal on Rwanda and obtain the full cooperation of all the Governments concerned.

86. In view of that situation, his delegation invited the Executive Committee to reconsider such hallowed UNHCR concepts as "access to territory", "voluntary nature of repatriation" and "right to asylum", not in order to question them, but to adapt them to the social and political context of countries like his own.

87. In addition to the insecurity created at its borders and beyond by the merchants of death, the Democratic Republic of the Congo had sustained serious environmental deterioration owing to the presence of large numbers of Rwandan refugees in the eastern part of the country, whose wood-cutting and poaching had destroyed the ecosystem in the Virunga district and surrounding area. It had also lost over 400,000 head of cattle killed as a result of the refugees' presence. Those losses were estimated at several billion United States dollars. The disaster had also affected the Congolese population and a mass exodus had resulted in numerous displaced persons and refugees in neighbouring countries.

88. He took the opportunity to request that various noteworthy initiatives, such as the Great Lakes initiative and others taken by UNHCR and UNDP, should be implemented without delay. To that end, he made an urgent appeal for the rapid organization of a round-table of his country's backers, in accordance

with General Assembly resolution 49/24 on special assistance to countries receiving refugees from Rwanda and in conformity with the Bujumbura Plan of Action of 17 February 1995. He called for a personal initiative by the High Commissioner and all donor countries which had commended the arrival of a new Government in his country with a view to national reconstruction and the establishment of cooperation in the Great Lakes region. His country was now faced with another massive influx of refugees from the Republic of Congo. Those unsupervised and unassisted refugees were growing daily in number and raised a serious security problem in his country, and that was why assistance from the international community was needed.

89. Mr. BERNARD (France), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that, although polemics were not part of the Executive Committee's tradition, extreme statements could not go unanswered. The comments of the representative of the Democratic Republic of the Congo on the role of the international community, UNHCR and France entered into that category and were thus unacceptable. As their outrageous nature detracted from the speaker's remarks, his own country preferred to regard them as an expression of personal resentment rather than as the views of the Congolese Government, with which it had always enjoyed relations of peaceful and constructive cooperation.

90. Mr. SELERI (South Africa) said that the theme for the 1997 annual debate was very appropriate. He welcomed the background paper prepared by UNHCR (A/AC.96/887), which emphasized the close relationship between repatriation challenges and human rights.

91. Between 1990 and 1996, South Africa had been faced for the first time with two major repatriation programmes. The first, from 1990 to 1993, had involved the voluntary return to South Africa of its refugees and political exiles and had been facilitated by UNHCR and the South African Government. The second had involved the voluntary return of 1.7 million Mozambican refugees to Mozambique with the signing of the Rome Accord on 4 October 1992. Their repatriation from South Africa had begun with the signing in 1993 of the Tripartite Agreement between the South African Government, the Government of Mozambique and UNHCR. Some 36,000 Mozambican refugees had been repatriated from South Africa with UNHCR assistance, 11,000 had been voluntarily repatriated by the South African Defence Force and several thousand had returned without assistance. Of the original 250,000 Mozambican refugees whom South Africa had hosted since the mid-1980s, approximately 90,000 remained in the country and would be granted permanent status.

92. As the majority of South Africa's refugee population had fled civil war situations in their countries of origin, the decision as to when repatriation should commence in the aftermath of a conflict was always critical. Thus far, South Africa had not insisted on repatriation unless a cessation clause had been invoked in respect of the country concerned. It continued to facilitate repatriation, in UNHCR programmes and for individual refugees who wished to return to their country of origin prior to a cessation clause being invoked in that country.

93. The High Commissioner's statement had touched on several positive developments, particularly in Africa, over the past year. That encouraging

news must nevertheless be weighed against the fact that the number of refugees remained unacceptably high. UNHCR was confronting some of its greatest challenges in Africa, particularly Central Africa. He called on all Governments in that region to recommit themselves to the fundamental principles of international protection. At the same time, international organizations must not be misused to solve problems that properly belonged to States. No discussion on international protection or repatriation could ignore the root causes that gave rise to conflict situations or violations of human rights.

The meeting rose at 1.10 p.m.

